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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001072

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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/07/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTY ACCUSES GOAM OF HUMAN RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS

REF: YEREVAN 971

Classified By: DCM A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Armenia's Heritage Party, an opposition party with a popular, outspoken leader but no seats in parliament, was evicted from its downtown offices in March 2006. Party officials told us they believed the government was behind the eviction, as well as other interference with their operations, including surveillance and lack of access to the media. They said that, after the eviction, someone had hacked into the party's main computer and stolen the names and addresses of party members all over the country, who had been harassed and threatened ever since. They said broadcasters had told them Heritage Party Chairman and former Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannisian was on a blacklist of politicians to whom the president's office had forbidden them to grant air time (reftel). They told us Heritage had had a very difficult time obtaining meeting space for its party congress, which took place August 1 at the Writer's Union of Armenia. A Ministry of Justice representative told us the court had ordered the party's eviction. We have heard stories similar to Heritage's from other opposition groups, and we do not rule out accusations that the president's office is behind the harassment of opposition parties. End Summary.

HERITAGE KICKED OUT OF OFFICE

12. (C) On August 3, we met with Heritage Party board member Gevorg Kalenchyan and Hovsep Khurshudyan, head of the party's Constitutional Commission, at the NGO office where the party has temporarily parked its headquarters. They told us the trouble started after the flawed November 2005 referendum, when Hovannisian publicly and harshly criticized President Kocharian at a protest rally. The party members told us that, after the rally, the director of the theater that owned the building in which Heritage leased an office began to complain about the party's sign that hung near the office entrance. In late February, the party received a letter saying the office no longer belonged to the theater, but that it was now the property of the Department of State Property Management. On March 4, party members arrived at the office to find that new locks had been put on the doors. The theater director said he had changed the locks. (Note: The party's latest lease with the theater director was set to run out June 2006, and the party also had an agreement, dated 2002, with the Department of State Property Management to lease the office until 2007. End Note.)

13. (C) The party took the matter to the court of the first instance, which decided the theater's actions were unlawful. Ministry of Justice officials unlocked the office at 1 p.m. on May 29, only to return six hours later and demand that the staff leave the office, as they had orders to reseal the door. When the party demanded an explanation, the officials said they had come earlier in the day on a preliminary decision from the court, but that now they were acting on the court's final decision. In the six hours that Heritage officials were in their office, their computer specialist noticed that their central computer had been hacked into March 8, four days after the locks had been changed. Kalenchyan and Khurdashyan said that computer contained names and contact information of party members all over the country.

14. (C) Ministry of Justice Chief of Staff Nune Khachatryan told us the Department of State Property Management does not do anything without a court order, and the court had clearly ordered the party kicked out of its office. She said she did not have information about whether anyone broke into the Heritage Party's computer.

HERITAGE SAYS PARTY MEMBERS WERE HARASSED AFTER BREAK-IN

15. (C) Khurdashyan told us that, since March 8, "dozens" of party members who live outside Yerevan have been harassed or threatened. He said a member complained during this week's party congress that he had been threatened with losing his job if he didn't leave the party. Heritage has lost some members who have caved to the pressure, including a teacher in Gavar who received the same threat.

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16. (C) NGOs report that this type of harassment is common, and is not limited to the Heritage Party. National Democratic Institute (NDI) Co-Director Andrew Bennett told us many opposition parties complain of harassment and threats. There also have been press reports of pressure on teachers and school officials to change parties. (Note: Schools are the most popular venue for polling stations in Armenia, and school directors can have a fair amount of influence over election results if they choose to. End Note.)

TAPS, TAILS AND TELEVISION

17. (C) The party officials told us they were followed regularly and overtly, to the point that street vendors have warned them about the men tailing them. According to them and NDI's Bennett, Hovannisian joked a few months ago about sending a letter to the National Security Service expressing concern about the quality of the surveillance, and asking them to please put more experienced, and less obvious, agents on his tail. Similarly, Khurshudyan said the wire taps on their telephones were obvious.

18. (C) Kalenchyan also expressed frustration that the party could not seem to get any television coverage. He said Hovannisian had been invited to appear on a July 11 broadcast of a political talk show on Yerkir Media (which is run by the coalition party Armenian Revolutionary Federation -- Dashnaktsutiun), but then received a letter from the station three days prior to taping, saying that the studio was going to be under renovation and the show was canceled. Khurshudyan said staff at several stations told him they had been ordered by the president's office not to give air time to three politicians, including Hovannisian. This has been confirmed by broadcast media employees (more on this septel).

19. (C) The party officials told us the party had had a very

difficult time booking meeting space for their August 1 congress. They had asked to use a government hall that the GOAM is required by regulation to loan to every political party once a year. khurshudyan said that, although the party asked for any available date for the remaining 2006 calendar year, officials denied them, saying that no date was available due to prior bookings and planned renovations. (Note: The ruling Republican Party recently held its congress in that hall. End Note.)

¶10. (C) Note: The Heritage Party is not represented in the National Assembly. Though Hovannisian has attempted to gather other opposition leaders under his wing, the most interesting game on the opposition's playing field is a clash of egos that has prevented them from organizing. In December 2005, following the flawed referendum, Hovannisian wrote a public letter in which he asked President Kocharian 21 pointed questions, including whether or not he had ever committed or ordered a murder, and whether his wealth had accumulated since Armenia declared its independence. The implication behind the murder question was an accusation that Kocharian was personally involved in the October 1999 parliament shootings that claimed the lives of eight people, including the prime minister and the National Assembly speaker. Hovannisian was emboldened in his perceived mandate after he learned that, according to the results of a May 2006 Gallup poll commissioned by the International Republican Institute, he was the most popular Armenian politician, with an approval rating of 74 percent. End Note.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Party complaints of harassment in general seem to be intensifying as the 2007 parliamentary elections approach. We have heard stories similar to Heritage's from other opposition groups, and they are consistent with media allegations of interference by the president's office (septel), all of which we find credible. We do not rule out that the president's office is also behind the harassment of opposition parties.
EVANS